

Part 2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament  
L. Biblical Wisdom in Everyday Life  
35. Parents and Children

A second practical area of life to which the wisdom of the Old Testament Scriptures has much to contribute is the matter of the relationship between parents and their children.

Many parents today have the mistaken notion that the word “NO” is inappropriate in parenting. And to be sure, “NO” can be used too frequently and indiscriminately, but sometimes negatives and restrictions are necessary so that children may learn that their freedom has boundaries, and that transgressing those boundaries has consequences. For if they do not learn such things nor ever experience the consequences of disobedience early in life and from loving parents who have the long-term welfare of their children in mind, then they, their family, and their society will eventually pay the price for their lack of self-control.

Let me just begin with a few proverbs that speak to the issue of parental discipline as one of the tools of loving parents.

- Proverbs 22:15 - *Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.*
- Proverbs 13:24 - *He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.*

Whether or not the rod spoken of here needs to be a literal one, is debatable. But the main point here is what the rod signifies, namely, loving correction—guidance into appropriate behavior. And that can be done in many ways. This may involve discomfort, for sometimes discomfort is the only thing that can get children to listen and to be instructed in appropriate behavior. But the most effective discomfort will vary according to the child; for one a strong word is enough, while another may give attention only through the removal of privileges or assignment of unpleasant tasks. Whatever the rod, its use is "goal-oriented: it seeks to develop a godly person who is responsive to the Lord and who walks in His ways."

This means that all good discipline is motivated by love of and delight in the one being corrected. Prov. 13:24 speaks to that: *He who loves [his son] disciplines him.* That's in imitation of God, according to Prov. 3:12: *The Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.* Furthermore, good and loving discipline begins early and continues until children grow up enough to take responsibility for their own lives. The early part is especially important, for the earlier such discipline begins the more effective it is (cf. Prov. 22:6): *Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.*

Conversely, the longer parents wait to discipline their children, and the more accustomed children become to living as they please, the more difficult correction becomes. What is just as true as that favorite proverb we just read is *"If you allow a child to live in uncorrected foolishness, then when he is old he will probably still be living that way."* Our juvenile facilities, courts and jails are plugged with people who prove that to be true.

Here's what God told Moses to tell Israel's adults, not only about their responsibility to remember the Lord's commands for themselves, but also to pass them on to their children and future generations. Deut. 6:4-12:

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.*

*When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you — a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant — then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*

Now, jumping to vs 20-24: *In the future, when your son asks you, “What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?” tell him: “We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the LORD sent signs and wonders—great and terrible—on Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land he promised on oath to our ancestors. The LORD commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the LORD our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today.*

These instructions and warnings about keeping faith alive and strong were often repeated for Israel, and elaborated on. After all, even if the generation that experienced the miracles associated with Israel’s exodus from Egypt would not forget the Lord—which itself was a stretch for that generation of “hardhearted” people—even if they would not forget what God and done for them and how he wanted them to live, their children and grandchildren would unless God’s commandments were indelibly impressed upon them.

And there are so many things that make this task difficult. Foremost among them is the sinful human nature. We’ve spoken of this in some detail in a previous lecture but it bears repeating. Because of sin, we are not creatures who, if left to our own devices, will eventually find a way to become the best we can be. Rather, if left to our own devices, and without God’s help, we will eventually find a way to become the worst we can be. Personal lives and interpersonal relationships tend to deteriorate like neglected houses, unless conscious and consistent attention is given to maintaining and improving them.

Deut. 6 singles out a couple of things that are destructive to remembering the Lord and his commands. Materialism is one. There's something about having a full stomach and lots of possessions that can make you forget that everything you have is a gift of God. Prosperity can not only make you forgetful; it can also make you careless so that you turn from worshiping the Lord to worshiping his gifts. "So when God blesses you by giving you a home," Moses says, "do not forget the Lord who brought you out of the land of slavery."

Another faith destroyer implicated in Deut 6, is the neglect of history lessons. The children who grew up in the prosperous new land to which God was bringing his people would not have been through the desert. They would not have crossed over the flooding Jordan River on dry ground; would not have seen the walls of Jericho fall.

That's why God emphasized the constant retelling of Israel's journey to the next generations. You can only understand the present in light of the past. Then as now, any society or family which shuns or neglects the story of how God has come through in the past, is fighting a losing battle in the present.

We can identify other faith destroyers in our day. A secular educational system is one. If parents leave the education of their children entirely to others, especially other non-Christians, they not only fail to follow the instructions of Deut. about positive godly instruction, but they allow instruction in an opposite religion as well. For secular public schools, as good as they may be, are not allowed to promote Christ-centered learning, but they are allowed and encouraged to spread the idea that what is essential for students to know, can be taught without religion.

Next we mention modern media. Television and radio is especially effective at promoting popular culture, much of which is contrary to Christian living. Much of what we read and hear tells us that the purpose for our existence is pleasure and that one's personal preferences and habits can be judged by no one else and by no absolute standard of morality. If people were to judge only by what they see on TV shows and in newsmagazines, they might think that all but a minuscule portion of pastors were perverts, that all but a few Christians were fanatics, racists, or hypocrites, that anyone still against homosexuality is ignorant and pitiable, and that "Jesus" is simply a word to express surprise or anger.

Simple busyness can also be destructive to the parental task—busyness that keeps us addressing the loudest and most urgent rather than the important matters of life. Many important things—like faith, family, and friendship—will suffer neglect for a while, but will deteriorate without serious intention and leave us in the end with nothing of lasting value.

All of these things I mentioned, and more, can prevent godly parents from fully answering God's call to impress God's commands on their children and thereby result in significant parental regret. To be sure, not every instance of loss of faith in the next generation is because of parental failure, but I wonder how many of those parents who heard or later read Moses' words in Deut. 6 ended up with regrets over their failure to adequately nurture their children in the fear of the Lord.

I suspect that one who did so was the priest Eli who was entrusted with the nurture of little Samuel toward the end of the time of the Judges. Eli seems to have done well with Samuel, but not so much with his own sons, Hophni and Phinehas. Although they also were priests in Israel 1 Sam 2:12 says that they were scoundrels who had no regard for the Lord. But it seems that Eli was at least partially complicit in their actions, for God asked him (v. 29): "*Why do you scorn my sacrifice and offering that I prescribed for my dwelling? Why do you honor your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel?*"

Years later, Samuel had a similar problem with his sons. 1 Sam 8:3 says, "*His sons did not follow his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.*" Nevertheless, Samuel had appointed them as his successors in leading Israel. And, in fact, it was this very appointment that prompted the elders of Israel to ask Samuel to appoint a king to lead them. That king was Saul who, ironically, had at least one son—Jonathan—who was far more godly than his father.

I'll mention just one more prominent biblical character—David—who ended up with several sons who apparently did not take to heart the lessons that God took such pains to help Israel remember. One son, Amnon, raped his half-sister Tamar. Another, Absalom, who was Tamar's brother, schemed and waited for two years and had Amnon murdered in revenge. Later on Absalom misused his position and popularity to lead a revolt against his father, and would have killed God's anointed king given the chance. And a third son, Adonijah, also tried to seize Israel's throne toward the end of David's life.

David's sons were adults and responsible for their own actions. Nor was their behavior unusual among royal families of that day. But Israel's families, royal and otherwise, were expected to be different. And David undoubtedly had some things to regret with regard to how he'd done in schooling his children in the worship of, and obedience to the Lord, and with a heart for what God was doing for and with Israel.

One problem was David's own moral failings. In the custom of the kings of his day, he had several wives. I say this was the custom of his day, but it was not the will of God. In fact, God had specifically warned Israel's kings not to acquire great numbers of horses and silver & gold, or take many wives, so they would not be sidetracked in their service to God (Dt 17:16-17). Now the Bible does say that David himself had a heart for the Lord, but you've got to wonder how many of his family problems were traceable to the difficulties inherent in maintaining a harem and raising the children of multiple mothers.

And then, there was more overt moral failure, e.g. the time that David—at home in the palace while his army was off fighting a war—saw and coveted the beautiful Bathsheba. He had her brought to him for sex, and when she later sent word that she had become pregnant by him, he tried to get her soldier-husband to come home on leave so that he would have relations with his wife and think the child to be his own. When those plans failed, David had her husband killed, and added Bathsheba to his harem. Though David later repented of his sin, he still had to live with the consequences of his actions, one of which was the example he had set for his children. A parent's impurity is like poison in the home; so the best way to prevent poisoned children is parental purity. It's not a guarantee, but it's one of the best tools parents have.

Another of David's failures was his passivity with regard to the discipline of his children. We can infer this from how David responded to the actions of his grown children. When Amnon raped Tamar, David did nothing. 2 Sam 13:21 says that he was furious but did not act. It was the same later, when Absalom killed Amnon. Nor did David act against Adonijah until pressured to do so by Bathsheba. Surely these are indications of his previous neglect in fulfilling God's instructions as given in Deut. 6. Admittedly, it couldn't have been easy for David to consistently parent and discipline all of his children from multiple wives. But his own moral failures coupled with his passivity made the job even harder.

Hopefully, Christian parents today can do better, despite the many elements of our modern world that make it difficult to fulfill God's continuing expectation for them to impress God's commandments and priorities on their children. Let me put it as clearly as I can: Parents owe to God a Christian education for the children God has given them. Maybe you thought I said that parents owe their children a Christian school education. That's certainly worth considering. But even at best, a Christian education cannot be passed off to any Christian school or church. Whatever means they use, Christian parents owe to God an education that teaches their children how to love and serve Jesus Christ in every matter of life.

Make no mistake; a truly Christian education is expensive. It requires a lot of time and energy and sometimes money too. It often means saying "no" to things you would like to do or to buy for yourself, so that you will have the resources necessary to nurture your children in the love and service of Jesus Christ.

Eventually, of course, children will decide for themselves whether or not to serve the Lord, but until they reach that time, those to whom God has entrusted them, must definitely not give them the idea that people are free and independent agents who decide and control their own destiny. Or the idea that what other people think of us is more important than what God thinks of us. I'm not sure that children and youth are more affected by peer pressure than adults. But the biblical truth is that it is not more important for us to be happy or well-adjusted—whatever we think that means—than for us to be whole-hearted servants of Jesus Christ. Because, in the long run, no one can experience true joy or be truly well-adjusted, if they are not in Christ.

Much of what God wants the next generation to learn will be taught by example. The best way I know to rear children who will stand for God against peer pressure is for their parents to exemplify a lifestyle based on the Word of God and not on societal standards. The best way I know to rear children who share the gospel and their testimony is for them to see their parents do this. The best way I know to rear a generation of believers who handle their money according to God's wisdom is for their parents to model godliness in the area of finances. The truth for each of us is this: Unless Jesus Christ makes a difference in your life, he isn't in your life. If your lifestyle isn't a little different, if your priorities don't exhibit some fairly major differences from those of your non-Christian friends, then what good is your Christianity?

But of course, verbal instruction is important too. God wants us to use all possible means to educate the next generation in the fear of the Lord. And that "us" involves more than parents too. No one in Israel would have argued against the primary responsibility of the parents for their children, but everyone also recognized that it was not their responsibility alone. The whole community of God-fearing servants was to have a hand in raising the next generation of God-fearing servants.

And this is still true today. Although the church (the body of Jesus Christ), has other important functions, evangelizing the lost, developing the creation to the glory of God, etc., one of its primary functions remains, making sure that the children of our fellowship learn to love and obey God. Let me conclude with God's intentions as expressed in Psalm 78:5-8.

*<sup>5</sup> He decreed statutes for Jacob  
and established the law in Israel,  
which he commanded our ancestors  
to teach their children,*

*<sup>6</sup> so the next generation would know them,  
even the children yet to be born,  
and they in turn would tell their children.*

*<sup>7</sup> Then they would put their trust in God  
and would not forget his deeds  
but would keep his commands.*

*<sup>8</sup> They would not be like their ancestors—  
a stubborn and rebellious generation,  
whose hearts were not loyal to God,  
whose spirits were not faithful to him.*